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# THE SOCIAL SELF IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: IDENTITY, POWER AND THE SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST ROOTS OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

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**Abstract:** This article argues that the symbolic interactionist sources of the first generation of constructivists in IR theory are worth recovering because of their ability to address what constructivists have always wanted to understand – the social construction of world politics. Symbolic interactionism is more or less implicit in key claims of canonical works of the first generation of constructivism in International Relations (IR) theory. However, constructivism lost some of its potential to address everyday experiences and performances of world politics when it turned to norm diffusion and socialisation. The second generation of constructivists generated rich insights on the construction of national identities and on patterns of foreign policy, but did not fully exploit constructivism's analytical potentials. Contrary to what most IR scholars have come to believe, symbolic interactionists saw the self as a deeply social – not a psychological or biological – phenomenon. Symbolic interactionism is interested in how inherently incomplete and fragile selves are constructed and deconstructed through processes of inclusion, exclusion and shaming. Today, third generation constructivists are returning to the sociology of Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel and other symbolic interactionists to address problems of identity, power and deviance in international politics.

**Keywords:** Goffman, constructivism, identity, power, symbolic interactionism, the social self, stigma, Wendt.

## INTRODUCTION\*

Alexander Wendt introduced the best known – and most criticised application of symbolic interactionism in International Relations (IR) theory. Wendt argued that symbolic interactionism can be applied not just at the level of individuals and groups within states, but also at the level of (unitary) states in international relations.<sup>1</sup> State

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1 Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It – the Social Construction of Power-Politics', *International Organization*, Vol. 2, No. 46 (1992), pp. 391–425.

interaction can thus be seen as a relation between the two states ‘Ego’ and ‘Alter’ that take on certain roles and counter-roles.<sup>2</sup> A central symbolic interactionist element in Wendt’s theory is that “structure has no reality apart from its instantiation in process”.<sup>3</sup> So if “egoistic or militaristic conceptions of self and other continue, it is only because of the interactive practices that sustain those conceptions”.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as this article will argue, symbolic interactionism has something more to offer than merely a processual ontology to IR theory.

By referring to symbolic interactionism, Wendt was drawing on a broad sociological tradition inspired by pragmatism, phenomenology and hermeneutics. Symbolic interactionism was named as such in 1931 by the sociologist Hebert Blumer, but originated with the social theorist George H. Mead at the University of Chicago. Symbolic interactionism is an interpretivist approach, in direct opposition to positivist and structuralist sociology. It is concerned with studying the ways in which people make sense of the world and the way they “go about their activities on a day-to-day basis”.<sup>5</sup>

Symbolic interactionism, it should be stressed, is not one theory, but a broad landscape of approaches, covering for example, social semiotics, dramaturgy, phenomenology, narrative and life history.<sup>6</sup> Yet, three assumptions are shared by most symbolic interactionists<sup>7</sup> – and constructivists pay at least lip service to the same assumptions.<sup>8</sup> First, human life is intersubjective. We cannot understand human behaviour outside of the communities in which people live. Human beings are “active and creative agents”: subjectivity, meaning, and consciousness do not exist prior to experience, but are “emergent in action and interaction; an approach that situates action as a primary conceptual and analytical focus”.<sup>9</sup> Second, social life is deeply situated, our definitions of a particular situation may differ from person to person and from group to group, understanding the realities within which people operate is crucial for understanding the social world. It is not surprising then that ethnographic methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews are preferred by symbolic interactionists. Third, people are self-reflexive; they learn and they can try to take the viewpoint (imperfectly) of the other in conversations. Contrary to the assumption of a rational, coherent self, the self is always contingent and incomplete.

2 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 185.

3 Dale C. Copeland, ‘Review: The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism: A Review Essay’, *International Security*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 193.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Robert C. Prus, *Symbolic interaction and ethnographic research: Intersubjectivity and the study of human lived experience* (New York: Suny Press, 1996), p. 10.

6 One caveat: There is no space to elaborate on the different strands of symbolic interactionism, the very label of symbolic interactionism, and its many internal debates. I would instead suggest consulting the original works.

7 Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini, ‘Introduction: The Body in Symbolic Interactionism’, in Dennis Waskul and Phillip Vannini (eds.), *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 1–18.

8 See also Friedrich Kratochwil, ‘Constructivism what it is (not) and how it Matters’, in Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating (eds.), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 86.

9 Waskul and Vannini, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

First generation constructivists such as Wendt<sup>10</sup> and Barnett<sup>11</sup> were inspired by Erving Goffman's dramaturgy and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, yet many of symbolic interactionism's most valuable insights are still to be introduced into IR.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, much of the social interaction is bracketed off in the actual analysis and second generation constructivism largely builds on already simplified versions of symbolic interactionism. The result is a somewhat sterile version of social constructivism that has little to do with the original insights of scholars such as Mead, Goffman and Garfinkel. With the third generation of constructivism, however, this is beginning to change.

This article argues that the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism are worth re-examining because they can give crucial insights into the study of power and identity in world politics. Symbolic interactionism has been discounted in the discipline of International Relations, partly because of the way in which constructivists imported symbolic interactionism half-heartedly into the field. The first part of the article focuses on how symbolic interactionism became somewhat of a straw man in critical and poststructuralist critiques of constructivism with a particular focus on Ronen Palan's critical assessment of constructivism. I examine debates about methodological individualism, arguing that the pioneers of constructivism – symbolic interactionists – saw the self as a social, not a psychological or biological phenomenon. I then take issue with the claim that symbolic interactionism steers away from questions of power and that this has prevented constructivism from engaging with international order and dominance. The article ends by showing how third generation constructivist scholarship (for a presentation of the third generation of constructivism in IR, see the introductory article to this special issue), associated with international political sociology and history, critical theory and the practice turn, is returning to symbolic interactionism for a deeper understanding of world politics.

## THE PROBLEM OF THE SOCIAL SELF

In one of the most profound and interesting critiques of the first generation of constructivism, Ronen Palan explains how Chicago-style symbolic interactionism (represented by Mead, Blumer and Schutz) made a deep impact on IR constructivism, especially on Alexander Wendt. Palan rightly notes that Nicholas Onuf was more inspired by Wittgenstein and that this has led to the development of two quite distinct branches of constructivist IR, one symbolic interactionist (what Palan calls 'subjectivism') and the other structuralist (what Palan calls 'language game')

10 Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, op. cit.

11 Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics: Negotiations in Regional Order* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

12 As Lawson and Schilliam put it "[i]n IR, many constructivists appear to have ignored – either by accident or design – what symbolic interactionists have been arguing for the past century or more", George Lawson and Robbie Schilliam, 'Sociology and international relations: legacies and prospects', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2010), p. 80.

constructivism.<sup>13</sup> However, Palan finds both branches lacking and suggests a more radical, Lacan-inspired version of constructivism, i.e. a psychoanalytical form of post-structuralism.

Wendt's use of symbolic interactionism became the most celebrated – and criticised – in IR theory and has shaped perceptions of constructivism ever since. This article will therefore focus on Palan's engagement with Wendt because it builds on a common, albeit problematic, reading of symbolic interactionism, not only in IR, but in the social sciences more generally, that the self is a psychological, rather than sociological problem.<sup>14</sup> Ten years after Palan's article, Charlotte Epstein published a powerful Lacan-inspired critique of Wendt and what she calls the psychological study of the self, which Epstein notes is inspired by symbolic interactionism.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Palan's (and Epstein's) key concern with Wendt's constructivism is the following:

Symbolic Interactionism is founded on a psychological theory of the self. That is why at the heart of the transference of this theory to international relations is the idea that states do possess a 'Self' that behaves in ways not dissimilar to individuals in the social setting.<sup>16</sup>

According to Palan, for Wendt (and arguably for symbolic interactionism) the self is individualistic. As Palan argues, "[s]ymbolic Interactionism and Weberian interpretative sociology are both variants of methodological individualism".<sup>17</sup> Palan contrasts this with Onuf's (and we could add Fierke's and Kratochwil's constructivism), which – arguably – sees the self as collective, developed through language games, inspired by Wittgenstein.<sup>18</sup>

However, for symbolic interactionism (and the sociologists that Wendt quotes), the self is first and foremost a *social* phenomenon, not an individualist or psychological one. In fact, this may be one of the key assumptions that all symbolic interactionists share. So Palan's critique of Wendt's individualist self is accurate, but it has little to do with symbolic interactionism, but with the way Wendt translates symbolic interactionism into IR theory. As Mead writes in his short essay 'The Social Self':

The growth of the self arises out of a partial disintegration, the appearance of the different interests in the forum of reflection, reconstruction of the social world, and the consequent appearance of the new self that answers to the new object.<sup>19</sup>

Mead's fundamental insight into consciousness was that it arose out of constant shifts and role-taking, of seeing things from the point of view of the other(s). This is far from Palan's claim that symbolic interactionism is empowering the "sovereign

13 Ronen Palan, 'A world of their making: an evaluation of the constructivist critique in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2000), p. 578. See also Maja Zehfuss, 'Constructivisms in International Relations: Wendt, Onuf and Kratochwil', in Karin M. Fierke and Knud Erik Jørgensen (eds.), *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 54–75.

14 See Gary A. Fine, 'The sad demise, mysterious disappearance, and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism', *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (1993), pp. 61–87.

15 Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (2011), pp. 327–350.

16 Palan, *op. cit.*, p. 581.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 577.

18 See also Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 17–21.

19 George H. Mead, 'The social self', *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. 10, No. 14 (1913), pp. 379–380.

individual”.<sup>20</sup> For symbolic interactionism, the self is immensely complex, fragile and always in the making. Or as Goffman wrote, “[t]he self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited”.<sup>21</sup> In fact, symbolic interactionism shares with Lacan many assumptions about an always incomplete self.<sup>22</sup>

### *A half-hearted import of symbolic interactionism*

The more sophisticated conception of the social self as impressionistic and delicate was never fully imported into Wendt’s constructivism, eager to present itself as a competitor to realism and as a successor of liberalism – macro-theories of international relations.

On the one hand, Wendt clearly buys into the general assumptions of symbolic interactionism. His states are intersubjective, they learn through ‘encounters’, they are self-reflexive and they are in continuous making. On the other hand, Wendt’s import of symbolic interactionism was half-hearted in at least two ways: First, as Zehfuss explains, although Wendt is inspired by both Mead and Giddens, structuration theory ends up being the dominant theory, and this colours Wendt’s approach to international problems.<sup>23</sup> Institutions such as self-help and typologies of entire worlds (the Hobbesian, Lockean and Kantian systems) are structural.<sup>24</sup> Steering away from analyses of everyday face-to-face interaction, including its emotional dimensions, Wendt’s work on national selves became reductive.<sup>25</sup> Second, Wendt translated symbolic interactionism into IR by turning the state into a unitary actor. Wendt ‘anthropomorphised’ the state when he chose to follow neorealism in treating the state as an agent.<sup>26</sup> As Kessler puts it, Wendt “admits that he necessarily starts with pre-given sovereign nation-states as the primary units and hence that sovereignty can still capture contemporary dynamics”.<sup>27</sup> My argument here is simply that Wendt’s state is indeed under-sociologised, not because it is inspired by symbolic interactionism, as Palan claims, but because it does not take advantage of its full repertoire.<sup>28</sup>

20 Palan, *op. cit.*, p. 584.

21 Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

22 Norbert Wiley, ‘The Self as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy’, *Symbolic Interaction*, Vol. 26, No. 4, (2003), pp. 501–513.

23 Zehfuss, ‘Constructivisms in International Relations’, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

24 For a sophisticated critique, see Petr Drulák, ‘Reflexivity and structural change’, in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.), *Constructivism and International Relations: Alexander Wendt and His Critics* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 148.

25 See Ross’ critique of how Wendt’s “sociality is first and foremost a cognitive phenomenon”. Andrew A. G. Ross, ‘Coming in from the Cold: Constructivism and Emotions’, *European Journal of international relations*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2006), p. 207.

26 Jutta Weldes, *Constructing national interests: the United States and the Cuban missile crisis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 9.

27 Oliver Kessler, ‘Toward a sociology of the international? International relations between anarchy and world society’, *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), p. 92.

28 For an interesting discussion, see also Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander, ‘Wendt’s constructivism: a relentless quest for synthesis’, in Stefano Guzzini and Anna Leander (eds.), *op. cit.*

It is striking that Wendt became synonymous with the constructivist import of insights from symbolic interactionism, given that he may not be its greatest ambassador after all. Barnett, for instance, was less explicit in his use of symbolic interactionism, but his analyses were far more inspired by it. In particular, Barnett's work on the Oslo accords and Yitzhak Rabin's role drew on both Bourdieu's logic of practice and Swidler's and Goffman's ideas about strategic framing and symbolic manipulation.<sup>29</sup> Swidler's perspective, which was not state-centric, made it possible for Barnett to develop sophisticated arguments about the social processes that made the Oslo accords possible within Israel.

Post-structuralists were quick to point out that first generation constructivists lacked an understanding of the productive relationships between self and other. Yet, the symbolic interactionist understanding of the self is possibly just as radical and performative as the post-structuralist one.

This becomes clearer if we return to the roots of symbolic interactionism, to Charles H. Cooley's concept of 'the looking-glass self', which tackles the social nature of the self and refers to how we are concerned about our own image in the eyes of others in a reflexive manner. As Cooley puts it: "To think of it [the 'I'] as apart from society is a palpable absurdity of which no one could be guilty who really saw it as a fact of life".<sup>30</sup>

When Erving Goffman (who developed his own version of dramaturgy) brought Cooley's looking-glass self into sociology, Goffman's focus was on social interaction, on what happened between individuals, not merely within them.<sup>31</sup> As Scheff explains, Goffman argued that "the individual self was an illusion created by social arrangement. Like most sociologists, he was extremely suspicious and rejecting of individual psychodynamics".<sup>32</sup> In sum, symbolic interactionism is not merely a 'subjectivist' tradition, as Palan argues, at least in its Goffmanian version, it is an enquiry into the human condition, seen from the perspective of the social encounter.

### *Shame and embarrassment*

First and second generation constructivists were less engaged with understanding the self as a fragile phenomenon, but third generation constructivists are occupied – in a variety of ways – with the self in international relations. Unfortunately, in recent years, Social Identity Theory (SIT) has strengthened the impression among IR scholars that symbolic interactionism is a psychological, rather than sociological approach.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it has led to a focus on self-esteem and downplayed the role of shame and embarrassment in international relations. Jonathan Mercer's version of SIT for instance, builds on Wendt and symbolic interactionism to show that international competition characterises international politics "for cognitive and

29 Barnett, *op. cit.*

30 Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Scribner's, 1902), p. 179.

31 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Double Day, 1959).

32 Thomas J. Scheff, 'Elias, Freud and Goffman: shame as the master emotion', in Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley (eds.), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 239.

33 Jonathan Mercer, 'Anarchy and identity', *International Organization*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (1995), pp. 229–252; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy', *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2010), pp. 63–95.



motivated – rather than structural or social – reasons”.<sup>34</sup> He employs Mead’s concept of ‘perspective taking’, i.e. putting oneself in the situation of others as integral to any social interaction, including a self-help system.<sup>35</sup> Yet the problem is that SIT assumes a universal desire for self-esteem, contrary to symbolic interactionism. As third generation constructivists such as Subotic and Zarakol explain, states’ ‘sense of self’ or cultural intimacy may be linked to sense of shame, guilt or embarrassment rather than positive traits or characteristics.<sup>36</sup> In other words, states’ international positions are not just a result of their struggle for a better status vis-à-vis other states as SIT would have it, but also a result of their dealings with their own past and domestic conflicts (which again are shaped by the outside world). McCourt’s work on Britain’s post-Second World War role is a good example of how third generation constructivist scholarship drawing explicitly on Mead’s idea of roles (as emerging through interaction), avoids the reductionist argument that social identity is necessarily linked to an ethno-centric search for a positive self-esteem.<sup>37</sup>

The third generation of constructivism insists that shame and embarrassment, not just self-esteem, are major drivers of world politics and that they are situationally experienced and socially constructed. As Goffman argued “[o]ne assumes that embarrassment is a normal part of social life, the individual becoming uneasy not because he is personally maladjusted but rather because he is not... embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially prescribed behaviour, but part of this orderly behaviour itself”.<sup>38</sup> Building on the idea that shame can be studied as the social production of normality, not a unique individual experience, Zarakol and Adler-Nissen – in different ways – explore insider-outsider dynamics in international relations. Zarakol shows how non-Western empires, the Russian, the Ottoman and the Japanese empires, have responded to Western norms, leading to inferiority complexes and attempts to remediate identities.<sup>39</sup> Drawing on Goffman, Adler-Nissen shows through fieldwork and in-depth interviews with diplomats, that shame and collective self-censorship are part of the everyday diplomacy shaping European integration.<sup>40</sup>

34 Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 247.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 236.

36 Jelena Subotic and Ayse Zarakol. ‘Cultural intimacy in international relations’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (2013), pp. 915–938.

37 David M. McCourt, ‘Role-playing and identity affirmation in international politics: Britain’s reinvasion of the Falklands, 1982’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2011), pp. 1599–1621; David M. McCourt, ‘The roles states play: a Meadian interactionist approach’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2012), pp. 370–392.

38 Goffman, quoted in Scheff, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

39 Ayse Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East learned to live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2010).

40 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, ‘Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society’, *International Organization*, Vol. 68, No. 1 (2014); Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Opting Out of the European Union: Diplomacy, Sovereignty and European integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).



The recent interest among constructivist IR scholars in ontological (in)security also draws on insights from symbolic interactionism.<sup>41</sup> Understood as a sense of a consistent self, ontological security has become a useful, but also controversial concept for IR scholarship. While there is no agreement on the dynamics that create or unravel ontological security, or whether any security is possible at all, this scholarship seeks – in a variety of ways – to translate the symbolic interactionist social self into actual analysis of international interactions, be they historical or contemporary, peaceful or violent. One version is Steele’s Goffman-inspired argument that particular performances help produce a number of selves that may mediate ontological insecurity.<sup>42</sup> Steele relates the problem of the self directly to Kierkegaard’s notion of the self as “a relation that relates itself to its own self”,<sup>43</sup> i.e. to an existential issue. Elsewhere, Steele draws on Goffman’s dramaturgical notion of the sense of self to understand violence and the politics of memory.<sup>44</sup> As should be clear, the third generation of constructivists are recovering currents in symbolic interactionism acknowledging that the self is deeply social, and that the relationship between self and society is not just an analytical problem, but an ontological and epistemological one.

## POWER, NORMS AND DEVIANCE

Returning to Palan’s critique, his second major issue with constructivism (and its symbolic interactionist roots) is that it “never enquires about the emergence of the subject-as-actor and shies away from questions of power, justice, distribution and so on”.<sup>45</sup> Palan’s point is frequently-voiced against symbolic interactionism: by focusing on the everyday, one is simply ignoring structure and thus helping to sustain it. Yet to claim that symbolic interactionism is not engaged with problems of power, justice and distribution is perhaps even more odd than to say that it is individualistic. Symbolic interactionism is deeply engaged with power; theoretically and empirically. This is crucial for the development of third generation constructivism.

Marginalisation, exclusion and domination have always been a central concern for symbolic interactionists. Garfinkel’s first ever publication was the short story ‘Color Trouble’ based on observations of the racial segregation and discrimination of black women travelling on a bus in Virginia.<sup>46</sup> Goffman’s book *Asylums* explored the situation of patients in a psychiatric hospital and its disciplining effects on both

41 Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: state identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2006), pp. 341–370; Bahar Rumelili, ‘Identity and desecuritisation: the pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2015), pp. 52–74.; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-identity and the IR state* (London: Routledge, 2008); Ayse Zarakol, ‘Ontological (in) security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan’, *International Relations*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), pp. 3–23.

42 Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, *op. cit.*

43 Kierkegaard, quoted in B. J. Steele, ‘The Politics and Limits of the Self: Kierkegaard, Neoconservatism and International Political Theory’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2013a), p. 160.

44 Brent J. Steele, *Alternative accountabilities in global politics: the scars of violence* (London: Routledge, 2013).

45 Palan, *op. cit.*, p. 585.

46 See Keith Doubt, ‘Garfinkel before ethnomethodology’, *The American Sociologist*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1989), pp. 252–262.

patients and doctors.<sup>47</sup> Goffman focused on what he coined “total institutions” (e.g. prisons, monasteries, asylums, hospitals etc.) and in particular what these institutions did to the humans that constituted them. It is true that power and domination are often more implicit themes in symbolic interactionist theory,<sup>48</sup> but it perpetuates the empirical analyses of everything from gender roles to crime and class structures. One of Goffman’s most influential books *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* addressed social deviance, marginalisation and how the stigmatised coped with it. According to Goffman, “[...] the function of stigma processes is to enlist support for society from those who aren’t supported by it”.<sup>49</sup>

Yet Palan is right that much of IR constructivism has not been interested in the repressive or disciplining structures of world politics.<sup>50</sup> Even scholars interested in the use of social rewards, punishments or shaming to socialise agents into accepting, say, human rights<sup>51</sup> mainly focused on how states could be induced into a ‘pro-normative’ behaviour, and downplayed rejection of social norms.<sup>52</sup> As Cardenas argues, studies of norm compliance have failed to take norm violations seriously and have mostly focused on “positive changes in state behaviour”.<sup>53</sup>

However, a more recent wave of constructivist studies understands socialisation as the contest between different normative systems. For instance, Wiener draws on Garfinkel’s work<sup>54</sup> to demonstrate that the meaning of a norm cannot be taken for granted, particularly not when it is moved outside its original sociocultural context.<sup>55</sup> Garfinkel’s experiments on norm-breaching and deviance show that what appears to be unimportant conventions of talk – unstated cultural assumptions about what is said and why – turn out to be crucial to the fabric of social life. Yet even constructivist studies that problematise norm transfer have failed to show how socialisation produces and upholds a particular ontology for the norm entrepreneur.<sup>56</sup>

A related development in constructivism is that the analytical focus has shifted from norm entrepreneurs to “the targets of socialisation”.<sup>57</sup> Acharya, for instance, claims that “norm diffusion should be understood as a two-way process”.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, local and regional actors are not only norm-takers, but also norm-makers and norm-

47 Erving Goffman, *Asylums: essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1961).

48 Simon J. Williams, ‘Appraising Goffman’, *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (1986), p. 360.

49 Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 138.

50 For an excellent critique, see Charlotte Epstein, ‘Stop Telling Us How to Behave: Socialization or Infantilization?’, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2012), pp. 135–145.

51 Thomas Risse and Kathrin Sikkink, ‘The Socialization of Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices: Introduction’, in: Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathrin Sikkink (eds.), *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–38.

52 Alastair Johnston, ‘Treating International Institutions as Social Environments’, *International Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (2001), p. 510.

53 Sonia Cardenas, ‘Norm Collision: Explaining the Effects of International Human Rights Pressure on State Behavior’, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (2004), p. 227.

54 Harold Garfinkel, ‘Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an Intersexed Person’, in Harold Garfinkel (ed.), *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice, 1967), pp. 116–185.

55 Antje Wiener, ‘Contested Meaning of Norms: A Research Framework’, *Comparative European Politics*, Vol. 5 (2007), pp. 1–17.

56 Trine Flockhart, ‘Complex Socialization: A Framework for the Study of State Socialization’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 12 (2006), pp. 89–118.

57 Andrew P. Cortell and James W. Davis, ‘When Norms Clash: International Norms, Domestic Practices, and Japan’s Internalisation of the GATT/WTO’, *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2005), pp. 3–25.

58 Amitav Acharya, ‘How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism’, *International Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (2004), pp. 239–275.

givers (what Acharya calls ‘norm subsidiarity’). One example is Latin American countries promoting the principle of non-intervention against Western traditions of interference. However, in focusing on local responses to transnational norms, Acharya fails fully to address the effect of norm subsidiarity on the global normative order. Moreover, he focuses on the development of positive norms and disregards that “normative work is not only about defining, redefining, exporting or resisting norms locally; it is also about excluding what is different – what is considered ‘abnormal’”.<sup>59</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, this is where symbolic interactionism provides answers to how normality is socially constructed. Instead of interpreting interactions as a one-way disciplining process, symbolic interactionism explores the negotiation of social order as a complex interactive process. For instance, while stigma involves an ‘asymmetric power relationship’, stigma may be resisted and coped with in various ways, leading to a complex interaction between the stigmatiser and the stigmatised. This interaction is crucial to “the success or failure of attempts to enforce discipline and define the ‘normal’”.<sup>60</sup> Of course, this does not mean that the dominated or weak actors are responsible for their own subordination, but it gives them agency and shows the productive effects of resistance and self-reflection in international relations.<sup>61</sup>

## AN INDUCTIVE APPROACH TO SOCIAL ORDER

Methodologically, symbolic interactionism’s inductive orientation “nurtured the seeds of critical ethnography”.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, symbolic interactionism questioned established conventions and structures of domination by demonstrating what they did to human beings and their experiences of their lives. While the early constructivist models of socialisation often (explicitly or implicitly) assumed the pre-existence of a rather thick international ‘society’, which had already constituted the principal actors as having particular identities and interests,<sup>63</sup> third generation constructivism is inspired by the methodology of symbolic interactionism, and in particular its inductive approach.

<sup>59</sup> Adler-Nissen, ‘Stigma Management in International Relations’, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>61</sup> See also Rebecca Adler-Nissen, *Opting Out of the European Union*, *op. cit.*

<sup>62</sup> David M. Smith, ‘The Challenge of Urban Ethnography’, in Yali Zou and Enrique T. Trueba (eds.), *Ethnography and Schools: Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Education* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), p. 172.

<sup>63</sup> Ayse Zarakol, ‘What made the modern world hang together: Socialisation or Stigmatisation?’, *International Theory*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2014), p. 311.

Under the broad heading of the practice turn in IR, constructivists have begun zooming in on everyday practices in world politics.<sup>64</sup> In Pouliot's words constructivist methodology is oriented towards "the mutually constitutive dialectics between the social construction of knowledge and the construction of social reality",<sup>65</sup> seeking to bridge agency and structure without bracketing them in turn.<sup>66</sup> As Hopf explains, "[t]he backbone of an interpretivist epistemology is phenomenology and induction".<sup>67</sup> It is exactly this epistemology which help Adler-Nissen and Pouliot explore everyday moves by ambassadors in the UN Security Council that explained the negotiations that led to the international intervention in Libya in 2011, not because as one NATO ambassador explains "[a]t some point you just know where the wind blows".<sup>68</sup> For the practice turn (and for symbolic interactionism) the idea is not to get into the heads of people. Instead, the aim is to see what goes on between them.<sup>69</sup> Symbolic interactionism is not interested in motivations or intentions when it comes to analysing the social and political; the fundamental building blocks of social life are not individuals but social interactions.

### *How is social order accomplished?*

Theoretically, at the centre of symbolic interactionism is a concern with the problem of social order. Rather than seeing order produced from the top-down or through class structures (alone), social order has to be performed into being. Contrary to those linking instances of marginalisation and discrimination to structural notions of 'hegemony' or 'empire',<sup>70</sup> symbolic interactionism insists that 'it takes two to tango'. By stressing the interaction between those actors that (strategically or not) impose 'normal' behaviour and those that are constituted as transgressive, the weak or deviant may play a more important role than hitherto acknowledged. This does not mean that they are responsible for their own subordination, but rather, as Zarakol has pointed out in her critique of Finnemore and Sikkink's norm diffusion, "norm-internalisation does not always lead to socialisation, instead stigmatisation drives many instances of both norm-compliance and norm-rejection by non-Western states".<sup>71</sup>

64 Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2011), pp. 1–36; Christian Bueger and Frank Gadinger, *International Practice Theories: New Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Iver B. Neumann, 'Returning Practice to the Linguistic Turn: The Case of Diplomacy', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (2002), pp. 627–651; Rebecca Adler-Nissen and Vincent Pouliot, 'Power in Practice: Negotiating the International Intervention in Libya', *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (2014), pp. 889–911; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Towards a Practice Turn in EU Studies: The Everyday of European Integration', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (2016), pp. 87–103; Jorg Kustermans, 'Parsing the Practice Turn: Practice, Practical Knowledge, Practices', *Millennium-Journal of International Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2016), pp. 175–196; Vincent Pouliot, "'Subjectivism": Toward a Constructivist Methodology', *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2007), p. 359–384.

65 Pouliot, "'Subjectivism'", *op. cit.*, p. 359.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 367.

67 Ted Hopf, quoted in Pouliot, "'Subjectivism'", *op. cit.*, p. 368.

68 Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

69 See Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders: The Politics and Practice of Multilateral Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

70 Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, 'Retrieving the Imperial: Empire and International Relations', *Millennium – Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 31 (2002), pp. 109–127.

71 Zarakol, 'What made the modern world hang together', *op. cit.*, p. 313.

Goffman's theory of social interaction springs from a theoretical ambition to understand how social life is organised.<sup>72</sup> Apart from supplementing the structural approaches linked to self-other approaches in IR, symbolic interactionism provides a detailed understanding not only of the discursive preconditions for particular forms of global governance, but how these institutional structures work in practice. This is a point where symbolic interactionism differs from post-structuralism in its approach to politics. For symbolic interactionists, social order is a collective achievement to which we all contribute. This means that there is always the possibility of a collapse of the social or society if its norms and values are not constantly reaffirmed.<sup>73</sup> The anomie lurking behind symbolic interactionism holds a great promise for IR theory.

In sum, symbolic interactionism is receiving, once again, attention by third generation constructivists – and IR scholars more broadly. Until recently, constructivist literature steered away from processes of exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination found in works of Goffman and Garfinkel. In the portrait of symbolic interactionism in much of second generation IR constructivism, there was no or little mentioning of the complexities of the self, its deeply social character and its relations to deviance. In this way, Palan's critique of constructivism was well-founded. Today, however, given the importance that third generation constructivists are currently giving to symbolic interactionism and dramaturgy, the critique no longer holds.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article has been to point out that critiques of constructivism have been too easily subsumed under the headings 'methodological individualism' or 'Chicago-school'. This has led to criticisms based on oversimplified conceptions of symbolic interactionism. Mead's fundamental insight (picked up by Goffman) was that the self is social not biological and that the 'looking glass self' generates emotions, such as embarrassment, pride and anger. From this perspective, emotions and identities are produced in everyday interactions of international relations; they are embodied, yet interactional experiences. As Turner puts it: "the human body has to be constantly and systematically produced, sustained, and presented in everyday life and therefore the body is best regarded as a potentiality which is realized and actualized through a variety of social regulated activities or practices".<sup>74</sup>

However, constructivism lost sense of such experiences as it became occupied with the transmission of dominant norms. Forgetting their intellectual roots, constructivists have tended to bracket the processes through which the agent reacts and negotiates these norms. They have also disregarded the fact that the interaction with norm entrepreneurs may modify "the original social structures and institutional environments".<sup>75</sup> Symbolic interactionism would insist that it is necessary to see various forms of dominance and structural inequalities as interactional processes, that is, always co-constituted by the weak in some way or another.

<sup>72</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, *op. cit.*, p. xv.

<sup>73</sup> Adler-Nissen, *Stigma Management in International Relations*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

<sup>74</sup> Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 24.

<sup>75</sup> Alastair I. Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 17.

Moreover, symbolic interactionism reminds us that there are still many “traffic rules of social interaction” that need to be explored.<sup>76</sup> Uncovering the tacit rules guiding social interaction is crucial for understanding international relations. To reveal the work that goes into taken-for-granted phenomena in world politics is to show that for instance even decisions to go to war involve mundane situations of embarrassment and professional insecurities.<sup>77</sup> Thereby symbolic interactionism pulls the ‘high politics’ of international relations down from its pedestal; it makes it trivial, and thus accessible for powerful critique. This is one of the main gains of returning to symbolic interactionism.

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<sup>76</sup> Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Interaction* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> Adler-Nissen and Pouliot, ‘Power in Practice’, *op. cit.*